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University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland  
School of Social Work

**Sexuality and Social Work Conference 2016**  
18-19 August 2016

Olten/Switzerland

# Rights through alliances; Findings from a European project tackling homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools through the engagement of families and young people

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Dr Peter Ryan, Professor of Mental Health, Middlesex University,



# Overview of presentation

- **Findings from EU project** 'Rights through alliances: Innovating and networking both within homes and schools' (RAINBOW-HAS) 2013-2015.
- **Reports on secondary discourse analysis** (thematic analyses of the qualitative interviews with different families, schools and community associations (snapshot of contemporary practice).
- **Discusses relative silence of social work** in challenging homophobic and transphobic bullying, and their potential in promoting family and young people's engagement

# Rainbow HAS

- Examines homophobic bullying in schools in 5 European countries: England, Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, and Poland..
- Concerned with investigating practice in a number of different areas, (trans/homophobia and trans/homophobic bullying which the children of gay or lesbian partnerships may experience at school,



Rights  
against  
intolerance  
Building an  
open-minded  
world



CO-FUNDED BY THE EUROPEAN  
UNION'S FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS  
AND CITIZENSHIP PROGRAMME.

# Transnationality and LGBT

- Opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas within a context where there are different legislation and policies, institutions, cultures as well as socio-economic and political differences.
- Different starting points, some commonalities.
- Good practice not just associated with advanced development but finding ways to tackle issues with geographical and cultural variation.
- Building a transnational community; important concepts from Europe into the domestic concepts through engagement with children and families

# Highlights from EU Fundamental Rights (ILGA-2015) hate crime survey

- Examined hate crime and discrimination against LGBT in all EU member states
- 93,000 respondents
- 6% of respondents reported recurrent incidences of homophobic and transphobic violence
- 19% of LGBT respondents experienced harassment based on their LGBT identities, with 37% trans people experiencing harassment.
- 67% of LGBT young people (18-24 years) disguised being LGBT during schooling before the age of 18.
- Secondary schools were seen as the LEAST tolerant environments.

# Project design

## Stages of research

- 1.1 Literature review (Biblio-sitography)
- 1.2 'Heterosexual' families
- 1.3 Case studies of children who have experienced homophobic bullying
- 1.4 LGB families
- 1.5 Family networks and associations

Sampling: snowball technique and through LGBT and other associations in contact with families.

# Characteristics of sample for RAINBOW-HAS qualitative data

<b>Country</b>	<b>Qualitative interviews with LGB parents/carers</b>	<b>Qualitative interviews with heterosexual parents/carers</b>	<b>Case studies of children and young people who experienced bullying</b>	<b>Focus Groups</b>	<b>Interviews with relevant organisations and associations</b>
<b>Bulgaria</b>	3	7	4	3 (n=40)	3
<b>Italy</b>	4	11	6	1 (n=17)	3
<b>Poland</b>	8	2	5	1 (n=14)	2
<b>Spain</b>	5	5	5	3 (n=28)	3
<b>UK</b>	7	7	5	2 (n=75)	4
<b>Totals</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>10 (n=174)</b>	<b>15</b>



# Discourse Analysis

Stage 1 Thematic analysis of interviews. Results for each country are reported separately (see Arateko 2015)

Stage 2

Discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989)

intersecting and combination of categories within the thematic data enabled the identification of patterns of everyday talk and practices that legitimize power and serve to reinforce or challenge views across those 'speaking' about family and school life in relation to LGBT issues.

# Theme 1: Insider / Outsider Narratives in School Communities

- How homo-transphobic bullying was conceptualised, understood and responded to based on relational dynamics between school personnel and the families in their local communities.
- Determined by social, religious and cultural influences on the perceived role of these two institutions; the family and school.
- LGB parents managing the integration of their children into their community, including the school community, face different expectations and questions about their family structure, form and creation, unlike heterosexual families.
- Different discourses for LGB parents in this study meant they had to manage this, most often from the position as an 'outsider'.

# Theme 2: Blame and Survival in relation to bullying behaviour and experiences

## 1. Blame:

- Historical approaches to lesbians and gay men as parents – blamed for immoral behaviour, somehow subverting children
- Teachers blame parents for increase in violence in schools
- Often the aggressor rather than the person being bullied received most attention

## 2. Survival:

- LGBT parents - being 'as good as' – not 'damaging' children's development
- Bullying seen as a 'natural' part of growing up.
- 'Real' bullying involved violence.
- Strong social pressure to maintain gender roles and heteronormative patterns

# Theme 3: Problematisation vs ordinariness of LGBT families' in a heteronormative world.

- Being ordinary: finally (!!)
- we can begin to move beyond reductionist methodologies and integrate the public and private aspects of our lives, but there are still challenges ahead.
- Legislative framework that provides protection and equality to a country's LGBT citizens is essential but the struggle does not end there.
  - There are strengths to what lesbians and gay men bring to the parenting table:
    - Getting involved in school life
    - Getting involved politically
    - Social capital
    - Resilience
    - Tried and tested personal support networks

# Don't problematise our families – we don't!

- “This leads to people funding initiatives around the bullying, and creates picture of us as victims, whereas LGBT are very accustomed to dealing with and negotiating difficulties.”
  - Gay dad, UK, family 2



# Surprises and disappointments

- Limitations of an exclusive focus on homophobic bullying.
- What drives schools who are leading the way on this issue – zero tolerance policy; leadership in the sector; experiences of homophobia directed at school staff
- How schools unwittingly close down conversations – externalising the response
- How to embed in professional education



# Implications for training and lobbying

- This is not just a 'training package' issue
- must be embedded within a broader strategy around good practice in responding to all bullying
- The cultures of schools matter
- children and young people must be consulted and involved
- Draw on the experiences of the LGBT community in addressing adversity
- Research – what does it need to focus on?



# Implications for social work

- For a profession that prides itself in its work around and commitment to social justice, not a lot of research has been undertaken in this area.
- Legislation across Europe is positively changing the experiences of LGBT families and their children, and for young people who are LGBT
- Homophobia is complex – it is NOT just an LGBT issue as many children who experience homophobic bullying are not LGBT.





# References:

This findings from this paper can be read in full.

Hafford-Letchfield, T., Cocker, C., Ryan, P. (forthcoming) Rights through alliances; Findings from a European project tackling homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools through the engagement of families and young people. *British Journal of Social Work*. Online first from September 2016 DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcw104

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